

Climate crisis nears point of no return: UN; Slash emissions by 2025 or prepare for worst, agency says

The Toronto Star
April 5, 2022 Tuesday

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Section: NEWS; Pg. A1-A11

Length: 1138 words

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Body

The world must stop increasing its greenhouse gas emissions within the next three years - and then rapidly slash them - to prevent the more extreme consequences of climate change, according to the latest United Nations report that highlights the need for stronger action to address the global climate crisis.

Published Monday by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the report says global greenhouse gas emissions must peak by 2025 "at the latest" to keep average world temperatures from increasing beyond 2 C before the end of the century. Reductions in emissions that cause climate change will need to be steeper beyond that - 43 per cent globally by 2030 - to restrain warming to 1.5 C with "no or limited overshoot," the report says.

That 1.5-degree threshold is the aspirational aim of the 2015 Paris Agreement. A previous IPCC report warned global warming higher than 1.5 C would lead to more frequent extreme weather, more widespread food shortages, and the broader destruction of coral reefs, thawing of polar ice and permafrost, and loss of plant and animal species.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the latest report shows the result of a "litany of broken climate promises" that has prevented global emissions reductions over the past 30 years.

The report says global emissions from human activity in the last decade - 2010 to 2019 - were the highest ever, largely driven by fossil fuels and industry, and that projected emissions based on countries' collective pledges to fight climate change are currently not enough to prevent warming beyond 1.5 C.

"It is a file of shame, cataloguing the empty pledges that put us firmly on track toward an unlivable world," Guterres said Monday, adding that it is now "moral and economic madness" to continue spending money on fossil fuel projects around the world.

Experts and environmental groups described the report as the latest scientific alarm bell for the planet, and further evidence that time is running out to drive down global emissions after years of failure to take meaningful action to reduce emissions that cause climate change. The IPCC has reported average temperatures have already increased more than 1 C above pre-industrial levels.

"We are nowhere near on track," said Kathryn Harrison, a political science professor who specializes in climate change at the University of British Columbia.

"What this report is calling for is really a fundamental transformation," she said.

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The report comes on the heels of Canada's federal government releasing its first emissions reduction plan under a climate "accountability" law that is meant to break Canada's legacy of failure to meet every target it has ever set to reduce greenhouse gas output.

That plan promised to spend another \$9.1 billion - on top of the \$100 billion the government says it has earmarked since the Liberals took power in 2015 - on climate action, including measures to push Canadians towards zero-emission vehicles (ZEVs) and mandate that the country's power grids will run on emissions-free electricity by 2035.

But despite plans to impose a regulator "cap" on emissions from the oil and gas sector, the single biggest source of greenhouse gas pollution in Canada, some environmental groups have criticized the Liberals' emissions plan for including projected increases of fossil fuel production over the next eight years.

Monday's report said projected emissions from "existing and currently planned" fossil fuel infrastructure is too much to keep global warming to 1.5 C with "no or limited offshoot."

Speaking to reporters at a virtual news conference on Monday, federal Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault said the report was "sobering" and makes "very clear that the oil and gas sector cannot do business as usual."

The government's new plan projects Canada's oil and gas sector can drop emissions to 42 per cent below 2019 levels by 2030, a forecast Guilbeault described Monday as exceedingly ambitious.

He also said Canada will meet its national emissions target for 2030 - at least 40 per cent below 2005 levels - "regardless of what happens with (oil and gas) production."

On that score, Guilbeault would not say whether the government will approve the proposed Bay du Nord development, a deepwater oil project off the coast of Newfoundland. He would only confirm that a decision, which has already been delayed by more than four months, will be ready by April 13.

Environmental groups - including the Quebec-based Équiterre, which Guilbeault headed for 11 years before entering federal politics - said Monday that the new IPCC report should preclude any new fossil fuel projects in Canada, including the \$21.4-billion expansion of the Trans Mountain oil pipeline the government purchased in 2018.

Julia Levin is a senior program manager of climate and energy with Environmental Defence. Calling the government's projected increase of oil and gas production "reckless and dangerous," Levin told the Star the upcoming decision on the Bay du Nord project will be a "litmus test" for its commitment to climate action.

"How can they take this report and not come to the very obvious conclusion that projects like that just have no role in a carbon-free future?" she said.

Levin also questioned the government's reliance on carbon capture, utilization and storage (CCUS), which Environmental Defence and other like-minded organizations and climate experts view with skepticism - especially if it's used to prolong the extraction of oil and gas and delay the switch to cleaner energy like wind or solar.

The government has signalled it will create a CCUS tax credit, a policy expected to be included in the federal budget on Thursday. The emissions plan for 2030 also assumes about 13 per cent of Canada's projected emissions reductions this decade will come from CCUS.

"The way we talk about CCUS in Canada is as a fix to save our fossil fuel exports, and that is completely inconsistent with the message of this report," said Harrison.

There is some reason for optimism in the report though, Harrison added.

It charts how changes in diet, transportation, city design and other ways of life can reduce demand for energy and lead to steep emissions reductions in the coming decades. It also shows the costs of low-emission technologies for wind and solar energy, as well as lithium-ion batteries have dropped markedly since 2010, and notes that

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"maintaining emission-intensive systems may, in some regions and sectors, be more expensive than transitioning" to cleaner alternatives in the coming years.

Harrison said that's a "silver lining" in the report - but only if Canada and other countries are willing to embrace this shift.

"Instead," she said, "we're resisting letting go of a fossil fuel-based economy that is leading us towards disaster."

With a file from the Associated Press

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Journal Code: TTA

Subject: CLIMATE CHANGE (93%); UNITED NATIONS (91%); CLIMATE ACTION (90%); EMISSIONS (90%); GREENHOUSE GASES (90%); NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS (90%); POLLUTION MONITORING, PREVENTION & REMEDIATION (90%); UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTIONS (90%); AIR QUALITY REGULATION (89%); CLIMATE CHANGE REGULATION & POLICY (89%); CLIMATOLOGY (89%); GLOBAL WARMING (78%); SEVERE WINTER WEATHER (78%); GLACIERS & ICEBERGS (77%); SEVERE WEATHER (77%); ENVIRONMENTAL & WILDLIFE ORGANIZATIONS (73%); WEATHER (73%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (72%); FOOD CRISES & SHORTAGES (72%); LIFE FORMS (71%); ISLANDS & REEFS (68%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (67%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (60%); POLITICAL SCIENCE (60%); ANIMALS (52%); FOOD SHORTAGES (52%)

Industry: EMISSIONS (90%); ENERGY & UTILITIES (89%); GLOBAL WARMING (78%); NEWSPAPER PUBLISHING (73%); FOOD CRISES & SHORTAGES (72%); FOSSIL FUELS (64%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (60%); FOOD SHORTAGES (52%)

Person: ANTONIO GUTERRES (79%)

Geographic: BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA (51%); CANADA (92%)

Load-Date: April 5, 2022